



# free-range THINKING™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly journal of best practices, resources and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact



## The 6 Questions All Good Stories Must Answer (Starring Matt Damon and Christian Bale)

I have a confession to make: I'm hooked on trailers - and not the kind you hitch to your car or truck. It's probably because I love going to the movies, and a well-made trailer is a tantalizing taste of pleasure soon to come. It occurred to me recently, however, that a movie trailer could also be a useful tool when it comes to teaching storytelling. Think about it: at its essence a trailer is designed to sell you a story, and it has 2-3 minutes (in theaters) or 30-60 seconds (on TV) to convince you it's a *good* story.

What defines a good story? There are numerous elements that contribute to any story's success, but one yardstick to measure that success is to ask how well the story answers six questions that the audience, whether they are consciously aware of it or not, will definitely ask:

1. Who is the story about?
2. What do they want?
3. What stands in their way that makes the pursuit interesting?
4. How do they respond to those barriers or obstacles?
5. What happens in the end?
6. What does it mean?

I was reminded of these essential questions last week when I saw the trailer for "Ford v. Ferrari," a feature film starring Matt Damon and Christian Bale due in theaters this November. Based on a true story, the movie follows Damon and Bale (portraying auto racing legends Carroll Shelby and Ken Miles, respectively) as they try to win the legendary 24 Hours of Le Mans. Take two and a half minutes right now and watch the [trailer](#). Then come back, read the rest of this [article](#) and see which questions the trailer answers (and which it deliberately does *not* answer) to ensure you buy a ticket in November. *Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.*

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## The 6 Questions All Good Stories Must Answer (cont'd.)

Another confession: I'm a fan of both Matt Damon and Christian Bale, so I'd be primed to see them together on screen even if the movie was about who could make paint dry faster. That said, now that you've seen the trailer, let's look at how it takes on the six questions:

### 1. Who is the story about?

To get into a story, the audience needs to see people with whom they can identify, or who will serve as their guide through the landscape of the narrative. No matter what your subject or message, when you tell a story, the first question in the audience's mind will always be "Who is the story about?"

The trailer introduces us to several colorful characters - including such legendary names as Henry Ford and Lee Iacocca - but clearly this story focusses on Shelby and Miles. But even when a story is about a group of people working together towards a single goal - be it a bunch of toys in "Toy Story," a notorious family in "The Godfather," or the Jedi of "Star Wars" - the audience is more likely to enter the world of the story when they can view it primarily from one person's perspective (e.g., Woody, Michael Corleone, Luke Skywalker.) I haven't seen "Ford v. Ferrari" yet, but based on the trailer alone, I would say Carroll Shelby is the character most likely to answer question #1.

### 2. What do they want?

Once the audience knows whom to focus on, their next question is, "What do they want?" The opening moments (or paragraphs) of a good story will make it crystal clear what the person desires and, at the same time, will give the audience a reason to care about the outcome.

In "Ford v. Ferrari," Carroll Shelby is given an assignment by Lee Iacocca, then a vice president at Ford: build a car that will beat Ferrari in the 1966 Le Mans endurance race. Even though Ford was a manufacturing Goliath in the 1960s, Ferrari was a perennial winner at Le Mans and the heavy favorite to triumph once again. This allows Shelby and his team to play the underdog/David role, which is inherently appealing to most audiences.

### 3. What stands in their way?

As the characters in a story pursue their goal, they must run into obstacles, surprises, or something that makes the audience sit up and take notice. In short: stories don't get interesting until "I want!" runs into "You can't!"

What makes "Ford v. Ferrari" so promising is the number of "You can'ts" that Shelby will have to overcome to achieve his goal. He tells Lee Iacocca that you can't win with speed alone - you need the right kind of driver. (And we quickly see that Ken Miles, who may be the right driver, is not the cooperative "puppy dog" that will be easily convinced to join the team.) Miles tells Shelby that he

can't build a car that can beat Ferrari in 90 days, especially if it's Ford doing the building. And let's not forget the scenes of race cars exploding into balls of flame that remind us what happens when their drivers meet the ultimate "You can't."

#### 4. How do they respond to those barriers or obstacles?

Now we're getting to the essence of storytelling. How the people in your story deal with obstacles placed in their way will reveal their true nature (or tell us more about the team/organization they represent.) Do they cave under pressure or do they persevere? Do they play by the rules or bend them to their purposes? Do they try to succeed on their own or rally a team to help them?

Ken Miles may punch Carroll Shelby in the face early on in the story, but Shelby clearly uses some combination of charm, persistence and sheer willpower to bring Miles onto the team. Ford may be better known for making pokey family sedans, but Henry Ford II assures Shelby they also know how to win wars. And then there's my favorite line in the entire trailer where Shelby directly answers question #4: "We're lighter, we're faster, and if that don't work, we're nastier."

#### 5. What happens in the end?

Nothing fancy here: once you've established who the story is about, what they want, and what they must do along the way, it's time to let the audience know if they have reached the goal...or not. Good stories don't require a happy ending - sometimes we learn more by *not* getting what we want - but your audience will insist on a clear resolution. (There are exceptions, of course - Christopher Nolan's "Inception" being a prominent example - but if you're more interested in moving people to action than generating a vigorous debate on Twitter, a clear answer to question #5 will better serve your purposes.)

Since movie trailers are designed to *sell* (and not *tell*) a story, this question should not be answered, and the "Ford v. Ferrari" trailer appropriately steers clear of the finish line. Want to know if they win the big race? Buy a ticket.

#### 6. What does it mean?

In the end, answering this question is your most important job as a storyteller. When the conclusion of your story is reached and the final line is spoken, if your audience doesn't know *exactly* why they took this journey, it won't matter how diligently you answered questions 1-5.

As with question #5, the "Ford v. Ferrari" trailer does not (and should not) provide a clear answer to the ultimate meaning of the story. To do so would give away the ending, but the trailer does provide some intriguing hints. The movie's title alone evokes "David v. Goliath," which suggests we will be reminded that no matter how great the challenges we face in our personal journeys, there is always a way. And as the final scene in the trailer suggests - when Henry Ford II bursts into tears - it helps to have a sense of humor.

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## About Us

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